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## MARK ON SIR WALTER

In Mark Twain's *Letters*, lately published, you may see how, in writing to Mr. Brander Matthews, he lays out Sir Walter Scott. He takes off his coat to it, lands him a right and a left, and knocks the Shirra out of time in about three rounds.

“Brander, I lie here dying, slowly dying, under the blight of Sir Walter. I have read the first volume of *Rob Roy*, and as far as Chapter XIX of *Guy Mannering*, and I can no longer hold my head up nor take any nourishment.”

And so on. You know his fighting style. It is pretty work, great sport; but it meant something. It meant that he was in a rage with what he took to be some outrageous bladder of pretence, put there for the old world to boast of, and therefore for him to punch. So he punched in a string of fighting letters, each more aggressive than the one before it. What he did not see, and never did or could see, was that with every punch at the enemy a repercussion flattened himself, and that when Sir Walter lay prone, far flatter than he and far more spent lay Mark Twain.

There is a tale, I think in *The Innocents Abroad*, where one of “the unholiest gang that ever cavorted through Palestine”, was shown a sacred flame which, he was told, had been burning for a thousand years. The cavorter was ready for that, as for most things. “Well, I guess it’s out now”, he said. And it was. To us who are familiar with ruined symbols (in a world littered with them) and the piety which first set them up, that is a disgusting tale; but it extinguishes the teller as much as the lamp. To us it seems that you might as well flout the dead body of an old woman as the dead body of an old belief. What fun, on those terms, has not been made of the Bible? It is the *peculium* of the parodist. Now one may make fun of *Hamlet* to any extent, but it remains uncommonly difficult to produce anything better than *Hamlet*. In the letter which I have quoted there is a something at the end which shows that Mark himself had a suspicion. Walter Scott, he says—

“ . . . *was* great, in his day, and to his proper audience; and so was God in Jewish times, for that matter; but why should either of them rank high now? And *do* they? Honest, now, *do* they?”

He may not have believed it, as he goes on to say, but he suspected it. Perhaps, as he wrote his letter, he remembered that Homer did not cavort through the Troad, nor Milton through Eden, nor Dante through Hell and Heaven, and yet were great, even to him. But here's a singular thing in his next letter to Mr. Matthews:—

“I finished *Guy Mannering*—that curious, curious book, with its mob of squalid shadows jabbering around a single flesh-and-blood being—Dinmont . . . finished it and took up *Quentin Durward*, and finished that. It was like leaving the dead to mingle with the living: it was like withdrawing from the infant class in the College of Journalism to sit under the lectures in English Literature in Columbia University. I wonder who wrote *Quentin Durward*?”

I don't hold a brief for *Guy Mannering*. It is not a favourite of mine; but what under the sun did he find in *Quentin Durward* which he could not have found there a thousand times better done? There's the wind on the heath, there's the sea, wild life, wild weather, and above all there are the gypsies. They make the book, they are the book. *Quentin Durward* is well enough; the young man himself is a real young man; the Balafré is a real fire-eater—but France is not there, the fifteenth century is not there. And how could he find Colonel Mannering “squalid”? He could not. “Squalid” is a punch. The Colonel may have been a “walking gentleman”, but he was a gentleman, and a typical parent of the period. He is not at all more arbitrary than Sir Thomas Bertram, or Mr. Bennet. As an astrologer you might find him comic; but astrology itself is rather comic nowadays. Trust Jane Austen, however. She knows about it all. The type existed. Sir Walter was not far from it himself, highly honoured parent though he was. Read his letters to his eldest son in Lockhart, to his son, a young Hussar in Dublin: “These letters you will not fail to deliver”; “You will keep

careful accounts of your expenditure''. You will do this, do that—to a young man handsomely of age.

No—Mark Twain was in a rage, and like all men in such a passion, undiscerning. He lit upon some big bow-wow of Meg Merrilies, something of the Norna of the Fitful-Head vein:—

“My post must be high on yonder headland, where never stood human foot save mine—or I must sleep at the bottom of the unfathomable ocean, its white billows booming over my senseless corpse.”

That is Ercles' vein, and the true Mrs. Siddons vein. It is difficult to read, but not more impossible than Corneille when you allow for the convention. If Mark had not been so cross he would have been the first to know that in imaginative writing the fact's the thing. If he himself had been a hunter for *le mot juste* he would not have chosen “squalid” as a description of Colonel Mannering.

That easy line of attack, which would be equally deadly against Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, was adopted the other day by Mr. George Moore, who, in a published conversation with Mr. Gosse, tore into ribbons some such rhetoric from the Waverley Novels. What he did not choose to see, what Mark Twain probably was unable to see, was that while Scott's drama is hardly ever less than striking, hardly ever false to art or life, his language may be as conventional as you please. You will find speech as stilted and as insipid in *Tom Jones*, which Mr. Moore professed to admire. You will find ten times worse in Shakespeare. If you cut out everything but the conversational style in literature, what have you left in, after Chaucer? The inference, in Mr. Moore's criticism, obviously was that you had Mr. Moore left in; and I suspect that Mark Twain had something of the sort at the back of his mind. I am obliged to them, but—

I have lately read through a number of the Waverley Novels, as I do every year, never without local and temporary annoyance—the sort of annoyance I get from the Shakespearean clowning—but never, all the same, without loving Walter Scott. Lockhart says somewhere very truly that they all smell sweet. So

they do. They smell of the country. And however ridiculous, preposterous, strained they may be, they deal with great things in a great way. "How few friends one has", he says himself, "whose faults are only ridiculous." The only fault of these books is that they are occasionally absurd. They are the conceptions, and in the robes, of a noble-minded man. And he can scale the heights. Diana Vernon might be a heroine of Shakespeare's, Jeanie Deans is beyond Shakespeare. Nicol Jarvie has Shakespearean quality. Jonathan Oldbuck is like a Don Quixote of the East Coast. After Shakespeare, Cervantes was his master, for he invariably loved what he set out to chasten.

But what does it all come to? Why, to this, that if a writer is of noble mind, and can rise to the grand manner in his argument, you can stomach a deal of infinitely poor manner in the conduct of it. The fact is what life exacts and art has to give; the "garment thou seest it by" is of less account. But let no one think that Scott cannot soar on his quill. There is an image in *The Pirate* which will wash out Norna's heroics. The Udaller is going down to the fishing, his guests after him:—

"Without giving vent to observations which could not but be disagreeable to their host, they followed his stately step to the shore, as the herd of deer follows the leading stag, with all manner of respectful observance."

That is Homeric, and Scott is often Homeric. Like Homer, he may be allowed to nod.

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